

Apologies:

A journey toward self-discovery through an unraveling of the masculine tradition

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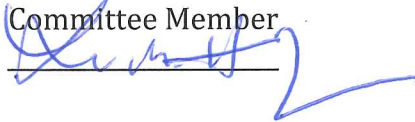
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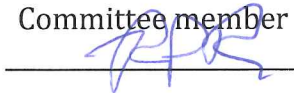
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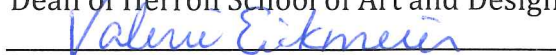


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What is the measure of a man?

Before allowing the brain to run away giggling with euphemistic glee, consider the import of this question as it has effected boys for centuries as they grow into not only personhood but find themselves firmly and inexorably growing in relation to the four-walled rigidity of what can be called “manhood”. The stereotypical notion of masculinity, although shifting somewhat through culture and time, has stayed fairly consistent and is the gauntlet through which every adolescent male must run though as he grows into himself to emerge a “man” on the other side. Being a male artist in my early 30’s I have been increasingly confronted by who I am in relation to this categorical box. And thus, within my current body of work one central question arises that forms the foundation upon which all other thematic notions find their footing; What kind of man am I?

In order to answer this the work I’ve created simultaneously looks backward and inward at my own life, examining its shape set against the unyielding confines of stereotypical masculinity. In this investigation I am better able to come to terms with those characteristic, masculine or otherwise that define me as a person. Through moments of nostalgia, acutely real displays of vulnerability, and gently outlandish humor, this body of work is as much an act of self-location as it is a critique of the rigidity found in traditional definitions of manhood.

The exhibition itself is my way of addressing this central question through overt displays of self, as well as bouncing my own experience off of the “box” that traditionally is understood to be “masculine” in Western culture. The true beauty of this exhibition for me is the transformation that occurred within myself relative to this question. For years I have sat in relative discomfort to the notion of Manhood, at times feeling well defined by a few characteristics and then at once feeling totally alien to others. As I will discuss in greater depth later, works such as the *Space Guns* show congruity with a masculine obsession with violence and power, while other works like *The Rose* run in almost the exact opposite direction. The fact that the work can balance well on either side of the gender binary is heartening as an artist who has long since been obsessed with trying to “solve” such binaries rather than simply becoming a student of what they can teach. And it is also from this precarious balancing act that the danger and fragility personified by the repetitive use of glass as a material can be seen and appreciated as a metaphor for who I truly am in relation to the question of manhood. This paper is meant to lead one through my current body of work dealing with this central question, as well as giving some background which informed the shift in my goal and approach to making artwork, that is, in itself, a macrocosmic account of how the masculine theme is played out even in the methodology of my own art practice. So central is this question that not even my artistic ethos are exempt from its influence.

Portraits of Manhood

In order to properly unpack these themes it is necessary to give a brief overview of my thesis show and how the work within can act to give some clarity to the main question at hand. The thesis show I will be discussing takes place in a large communal basement of a building that houses many artists studio spaces. The show is at once broad and specific in its method of approaching identity. Upon entering the space one is able to pan almost the entire show at a glance. The works in the show are meant to inform one another across the space without overpowering any individual works. Along the back wall of the gallery is perhaps the centerpiece of the show; an installation piece entitled *Man Cave*. In this installation I have created a small but comfortable living room area complete with couch, chairs, coffee table and shabby rug. On the coffee and side tables in the space I have set out a collection of vintage Playboy magazines in stacks. The furniture faces a projection screen that is surrounded by an overwhelming cadre of posters and wall paraphernalia as one might find in a typical dorm room or male teenager's basement hangout. Pink Floyd posters next to stolen airplane safety information sheets or stop sign and other things of this nature adorn the space. It's important to note that this wide collection of adolescent media is in fact comprised of artifacts taken from my own 17-year-old décor. Every single item is at once a piece of my own life and story as well as a stand in for type of thing one might find in such a traditionally male dominated space. This becomes pivotal as an underlying truth which acts as a pillar for the entire body of work. As I will discuss later, one of the reasons works such as the *Man Cave* (fig.01) installation succeed in this space is because they are made of things which not only touch the larger subject of masculinity, but are also personal and unique to my own particular account and being. However, the *Man Cave* installation, while being an effective way to tie themes in the show together is only a way to highlight the series of video works which I project onto the screen.



Fig. 01 *Man Cave*

This video series, entitled *Human Endeavors* 1-5, is a collection of works that address some facet of the traditionally masculine. (*Hunt*), (*Skin*), (*Chop*), (*Harm*) and (*Cry*) are based on a similar formula; I find a stereotypical masculine trait, ritual or action and perform it. While the formula is simple the results actually become quite complex. Whether it is my naiveté, failure or situational openness the fact of my imperfect relationship to these given stereotypes becomes a humanizing agent, forcing the action or ritual to stand in the scrutiny of honest trial, while still coming up short.

It is important here that I give a brief explanation of the different versions of traditional “Manhood” I reference in my work. These version or types of manhood come together to form the kind of phallic power that I have felt removed from for much of my life. It is these standards of phallic power, which I am attempting to pull apart and call into question. Similar examinations of such broad types of manhood can be read in Glen Pools’ article on the *7 types of masculinity* written for Inside Man, an online blog and men’s forum. (1)¹

One version of manhood I reference in my work is what I have heard referred to as the “Pioneer” or “Primal” type. Based in my mind on figures such as John Muir, Ernest Hemingway, Davy Crocket, John Wane or even Clint Eastwood’s character from the *Man With No Name* trilogy. This kind of man is identified by his ability to contend with the merciless “Wild”; pitting his wits, strength, and iron will against the elements to display a head-held-high kind of human triumph over nature. He has what is referred to as “True Grit”. He is in control, but wrestles with secret demons and can display a wrath that his enemies will feel should they cross him. He would have been forged in the fires of hard, lean times and posses the skills to survive in any condition. He is The Rebel, The Cowboy, The Outlaw, The wonderer, The Pioneer and The Lone Gun. No time for friends or weakness. The guy who enjoys a good fight, strong drink and fast women, without all the small talk or song and dance. For this type castration equates to inexperience. Being “green”, untested, unskilled or worse, a sissy who lets fear become his master.

Another version of manhood I reference might be known as the “urban” or “cultured” type. A man that is part James Bond, part Batman, part JFK, part Steve McQueen with a dash of Citizen Kane or Don Corleone. He is characterized by his resourcefulness, his success, his good taste, his power, influences and utter self-control. He is able to adapt and persevere because of a powerful mix of intelligence, skill, athleticism, charisma and capital means! This guy has got “The Goods” and makes the difficult look preposterously easy. He is a devil with the ladies while being utterly ruthless with his enemies. Yet just under that control boils a cauldron of aggressive passion, similar to the “Pioneer” type, which always threatens to destroy him or those he cares about. He too is a loner, needing no one- a real “self-made” man, who knows success, wealth and influence because he has either earned them or lived up to their bestowment. For this type castration looks like failure, mediocrity or loosing ones “cool” in an overt display of emotion.

A third version at work here is what I call the “Atlas” type, who is defined mostly by his physical prowess. He is the Spartan Warrior, the Arnold

¹ Glen Pools, *7 types of Masculinity*, Inside Man, July 3rd, 2014, pg.01, www.inside-man.co.uk/2014/07/03/seven-stages-types-masculinity/

Schwarzenegger, the John Rambo, the Circus Strongman, the Gym Rat and the Mr. Universe. This type is all about anything that celebrates male athleticism. He is a real beefcake, who loves sports and defines power as physical dominance over the self and others. He is every jock and soldier boy in every locker room since ancient Greece, for whom violence and aggression are native languages spoken with ease. Castration for this type looks like physical weakness or placing more importance on mental faculties than athletic dominance.

There is a final version of manhood, which also plays a large role in the formation of a comprehensive stereotypical masculinity in my work, yet is much less idealized and unique. This version is what I would call the “Every Man” type and is, in a way, a combination of all three of the previous three types I just discussed. Born of the 1950’s version of manhood, this type is your Average Joe, All American male. Regardless of his economic status, race or vocation, he has a Job that he goes to every day at which he works damn hard to provide for his family. In his own causal brilliance and effort he is able to conquer his world. He could be a Doctor, Lawyer, Mechanic, Construction Worker, Senator or Janitor. He is John Galt George Bailey or Atticus Finch. The color of his collar matters less than his dedication to routine- he wakes up, goes to work then comes home to his wife and kids. He can fix anything. He doesn’t cook or bake, but he is the only one allowed to touch the grill. He drinks, sometimes a lot, but he never misses a day of work, even when he is too hangover or sick to stand. He keeps his lawn like he keeps his hair; clean cut and well maintained. He goes to church to appease the wife and because it’s part of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. but he isn’t really keen on all that “God” or “feelings” shit. If he can’t see it, he doesn’t believe it. He goes to the gym to workout. If the TV is on, its sports. He loves his kids, in so much as he provides for them, but should they get hurt playing or need consoling he says things like “shake it off” or “big kids don’t cry”. He is a God Fearing, Blue Blooded, Strong, Hard Working, Resourceful, Patriotic American, with a No-Bullshit, Can-Do attitude, who goes fishing when I can and doesn’t share his feelings... even out on the lake. For this type, castration looks like non-conformity, running contrary to the status quo, involvement with any “domestic” activities that might be traditionally carried out by the a female and any kind of admission of weakness or vulnerability. (Unless the dog dies or the Yankees lose the Series during extra innings, He Does Not Talk About His Feelings, DAMN IT!)

It is important to note that these examples all sit in heavy relation to Freud’s notions of Castration Complex and how the threat of losing power is bound so tightly to the male sense of Phallic Power. As Rose discusses in her book *Visual Methodologies* “heterosexual masculinity is constituted by the boy-child feeling threatened by the prospect of castration” (154)² and it is this imminent threat from such a young age which leads to the masculine identity forming the way it does. As I have mentioned, each of these types has a worldview shaped by some notion of what phallic castrations looks like. They function in a way that avoids any loss of phallic power.²

² Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, Sage Publications, London, 2001

These stereotypical portraits of “Manhood” are what I choose to set my own experience against as I set up the conceptual formula for much of my current work. I set my own lack of experience with traditionally masculine activities against the act of performing the activities regardless of my vulnerability as a way of calling these stereotypes into question. It is also important to note that I am not working too closely with any particular “type” described above, but rather taking the sum total view of their collective “manliness” as fodder for the work. For example there are a few of my works, which deal exclusively with the stereotype for the “Pioneer” man. This version on manhood works well with my own relative naiveté to many of the acts typically preformed by this character and to my own attraction to this type of masculinity. The “Pioneer” type is something I aspire to be and yet am at odds with in terms of experience which makes it the perfect version to focus on. However, it’s important to state that this does not make the other versions of manhood discussed above, any less relevant to the work. In thinking about these masculine “types” my aim is to provide a direction and a tool off of which I can bounce my own masculinity and observe the results. Even when one version is at the forefront, the others are still at play in the background.

An early attempt at trying to act out of some of these masculine stereotypes can be seen in a video piece entitled *Snakes and Snails* (fig.02) The two-minute video, while not featured in the Thesis exhibition, represents a shift in my practice from unconscious concept formulation, to a much more direct cognitive process of ideation. *Snakes and Snails* features my own cheeky attempt to walk my audience through the steps necessary for troubleshooting an automobile. During my explanation the popular Taylor Swift song *Shake It Off* can be heard, gradually increasing in volume until it drowns out my voice. It is clear in the video that I have no idea what the heck I am talking about, yet I both sound and dress like I am a genuine expert in car mechanics. The character I am playing represents a male stereotype that I have never fully identified with yet still try to honestly pass off. I do in fact really love cars but I couldn’t tell you much beyond how to change a tire. So I already do not fit into a standard version of the hetero-masculine mold. Yet add to this the fact that I really dig Taylor Swift and my identity is pulled even further from what is considered “manly”. The work is meant to be humorous while still being able to tease out the absurdity of masculine standards as a central truth of personal identity. The *Human Endeavors* series dives deeper into this concept, yet is perhaps more nuanced and subtle; a characteristic which allows it to expand and form the support structure of personal specificity on which much of my current work depends.



Fig. 2 *Snakes and Snails*

The first piece in the *Human Endeavors* series, (*Hunt*) (fig.03) is video footage taken of my first experience hunting a living thing. Early one very cold fall morning, my friend Justin took me out to hunt for squirrel in acres of woods surrounding this house. After a few hours of walking, stopping, listening and walking again, we failed to come up with anything to show for our efforts. This would make for extremely boring video footage if the formula were not at work. However, because of my own novice level to the act of hunting, which is a predominantly masculine activity, the stage becomes set and even moments where very little action takes become filled with a kind of potential energy. Here my own naiveté, which is evident on my face, combines with ritual act of hunting to create meaning in the video. We even have the added benefit of Justin, the actual hunter and my guide in this video, along side me as a real life representation of how a man should function. His presence has the effect of grounding the stereotype in reality, which makes my own lack of experience more interesting to consider. However it is the position of the camera being mounted directly onto the barrel of the shotgun and facing back at me, which does the majority of the work in this piece. It acts as a kind of costume (along with the four-times-to-large camouflage jacket Justin lent me), adding a sense of absurdity it creates visual tension and in way, marginalizes my character in the video by appearing to control me from its own stable pivot point. The gun stays put and appears to swing me around in the frame. Additionally, by virtue of its position on the shotgun, the camera is able to pick up very unique audio as all the sounds in the video are filtered through barrel. The otherworldly sounds produced by this effect build on the tension and seem to further assert the fact that we are receiving this version of a hunting trip through the gun itself. It is the tool of this ritual (standing in a physical manifestation of the stereotype) that is controlling me through the process and not vice versa.



Fig. 03 (*Hunt*)

The film (*Skin*) (fig.04), which is second in the series, features my own unfortunate adventure in attempting to gut and clean a dead squirrel, having never seen or attempted the task before. The audience is given a front row seat to my own hesitation, revulsion and hysterics as I muddle my way through this masculine action, and by such close proximity invited to feel the same emotions in real time. My face, taking up the top 2/3rds of the screen and my hands, shot in lower resolution, which take up the bottom 3rd, preform this act of unintentional butchery. The formula is at work here as well. Once again my own naiveté is evidenced by my body language and dialog throughout the video as I am set to contend with this 'ritual'. The costuming in this case is a bit more subtle. My extra tidy haircut and the Polo shirt I wear are not something typically worn to preform such a messy task. This, combined with the split screen of the video, works to create the same kind of absurdity that we get in (*Hunt*), except here the embodied experience is much more visceral and immediate. Perhaps this is why my own honest inexperience becomes so humorous. It provides a much-needed break from the revulsion and tension produced by the lower portion of the video. In the same way, such humorous moments are broken up by instances of rediscovered repulsion, such as when my hands lift up in the video, to remove the poor squirrel's intestines into the gutbucket breaking through to the top portion of the screen. Throughout the video there exists a paradoxical push-pull between wanting to laugh at my own discomfort and feeling sickened by the sight of the dissection. This is effective in drawing my viewer's into the narrative and not letting them escape, while my point is subconsciously being driven home.



Fig. 04 (*Skin*)

The third film, (*Chop*) (fig.05), acts in much the same way as the first two, but with the absurdity dialed way up. This video features footage of me as I chop a log, naked in the woods. Unlike hunting or skinning and cleaning an animal, chopping wood is an activity that I am fairly comfortable with. Therefor the costuming in this piece, which is my own complete lack of clothing, also becomes a stand-in for my own vulnerability and discomfort with masculine standards as a whole. With my nakedness a new kind of discomfort can be seen as I check my balance and look down several times to make sure that I am not going to damage my...um...man-bits. This work is more symbolic and perhaps, cheeky in its approach. However under this tomfoolery, there is a very real sense of danger as I swing the ax down quite close to feet that are unprotected from physical harm. A similar kind of tension and affect exists in this video but is asked to take a backseat to the metaphor, which directs the viewer, quite forcefully, back to considering the absurdity of the situation and therefore the stereotype attached to the action.



Fig. 05 (*Chop*)

(*Harm*) (fig.06) functions a little different than the other videos in that it begins to form the bridge between the works that are simply addressing a masculine stereotype and those that deal with my relationship to self harm and destruction. In this video the stereotype being exemplified is a male tendency toward physical violence and rage. However, rather than simply demonstrating physical violence on a third party, weather animate or inanimate, I have instead chosen to make an image of my own body the recipient of this violence. What would be a rather straightforward indictment of the stereotype is thus turned back in on itself and transformed into something much more complex. In the video we are given sound first to accompany the black screen. Time spent in this place is a build-up as the sound of a knife being sharpened on a stone is the only content being offered to the senses. In much the same way as the sound works in (*Hunt*), there is a physical reaction to this sound, which lays the groundwork for the visuals to come. When we visually enter the scene we are given a shot that is set low and tightly cropped in on a photo of my naked torso. When I enter the scene we are only given a shot of the back of my legs and the tip of the knife as it hangs down by my side. The pauses create tension. The view in the scene creates disorientation. All work together so that when the stabbing starts it is at once a relief and a horrible thing to witness. My action in the video perfectly translates into rage as passionately, yet deliberately plunge the knife into my own representative body. However this is where the divide happens between that which is purely for the sake debunking masculine stereotypes and that which enters the realm of my own personal, human relationship to rage, and self harm. The blows I land are at once real and strictly metaphorical as they are being enacted on a visual stand in for my own form. Adding to this theme I created a second work in the thesis show using the post-stabbing photograph from the (*Harm*) video and placed within the gallery itself.

This piece, entitled *Self Harm* (fig.07), shows this photograph suspended with fishing line between two metal pillars in the gallery space. The strands of fishing line enter through my own self-inflicted wounds and extend slash lines past the borders of the image into the room itself anchoring it, quite literally, back into the reality of the physical space. In this way the artifact of the video work becomes not only a companion piece to it, but a way in which the video can exist as an example of my specific relationship to masculine physical violence, which in my case is primarily self-directed. However, the embodied experience that *Self-Harm* delivers is ironically a step removed from the immediacy of the same experience found within the video of the actual violence taken place. Yet, I believe it is possible for each to stand on its own and function in the same capacity to communicate physical violence. However without the context of the show itself, I fear that the overarching goal of linking this tendency to the broader body of masculine stereotypes might become lost in its own specificity.



Fig. 06 (*Harm*)



Fig. 07 *Self-Harm*

The fifth and final video in the series, entitled *(Cry)* (fig.08), also functions a bit differently than the first three. *(Cry)* is very simple in execution; it features a very tight, high definition shot of my eyes as I listen to the song *Fix You* by Coldplay. The viewer is given a front row seat to my emotional reactions as they unfold and I begin to cry uncontrollably as the song plays through. This video deals with a social stigma which posits that the act of a man crying demonstrates weakness. Loss of emotional control is seen as a kind of power castration, making a man less manly. In the first three videos the formula involved me taking an overly masculine act and performing in a way that stressed my own relative vulnerability to the ritual. Whether it was attempting something macho that I had never tried or performing a manly act in a obviously vulnerable manner, those videos featured my own demonstration of the typically masculine. In *(Cry)* I do the direct opposite. I cry, not in hiding, but fully in the open and this display of naked, raw vulnerability ironically becomes the demonstration of strength that is synonymous with the masculine power and control. The proximity I give my viewer into my own emotional distress is a way of doubling down on this round about display of strength. The use of the popular Coldplay song is also a way of doing this. However, it should be understood that *Fix You* is a song that makes me cry almost every time I hear it. This is important as it form another fold in the steel of specificity, strengthening the aspect of my show, which transcends the stereotypes and moves into a display of simple humanity. Men don't cry, but humans do. I am a man, yet I appear on camera, balling my eyes out to a song that pulls at my heartstrings before God and everyone, which is a decidedly unmanly act. However the type of courage needed to display such vulnerability is in fact a very human form of strength. However, this kind of strength is uniquely non-gendered and is found only in an act which lies counter to stereotypical masculine. The work is my way of walking my viewers through my own struggles with self identification and the way I have found myself to be both a part of the masculine and the feminine traditions, thus, have come to simply know myself as human.

The *Human Endeavors* series is perhaps the best expression of that journey. As far as my practice is concerned it was this work that allowed me to break open my own interior binaries and create work, which touches my viewer through a true revealing of my self. Additionally it was breaking away from this formula, or rather internalizing it to the point of subconscious reflex, which represents the single most important advancement in the way I make artwork. To understand this fully it is worth going back and examining some of the earlier works from my graduate experience.



Fig. 08 (*Cry*)

Connections to Early Work

My practice as an artist prior to this current body of work was aimed primarily with finding a means of expression, which might bridge the gap between two diametrically opposed aspects of a binary, to which I was irresistibly attracted. For years my work dealt in some way with the interplay between the natural world and the synthetic. Even as I became interested, through my formal training, in attacking the institution of ART and White Cube, I would still find ways to come back to this conversation. Looking back it's little wonder why this conflict existed. Two doctors who would discuss medicine over dinner raised me in a house of science. However, these same people, especially my father, held art, beauty, music and nature in high regard. In addition to this I spent much of my time as a child running around the stunning landscape of the North Tucson, collecting wonders from the world around me and inventing my way through the long afternoons. It's no surprise that both sides of the binary, science vs. magic or nature vs. the synthetic, grew so strongly in my creative make up. This profound esthetic love for desert sunsets came from the same eyes and heart that was so taken with monumental architecture.

It was only after entering the art institution that this draw toward esthetics gave way to a blossoming need for concept. Artists such as Ansel Adams, whom I had once revered above all others, began to be replaced with figures such as Edward Burtinsky. While Adams, in his life long effort to chronicle the beauty of the American Wild, was able to create images that drew my eye, Burtinsky's was able to

go a step further and open up my mind. The visually arresting style Burtinsky has crafted over the years would be far less intriguing if he did not actively make the decision to turn his camera on subject matter which documents the active destruction of such beautiful wild places that Adam's so revered. Burtinsky's genius lies in the subtlety with which he wields beauty, forcing it to serve his own philosophical ends. When we see Burtinsky photograph, such as the *Tire yard #2* we are at once asked to admire the esthetic beauty of the scene while considering the horrible implications of such waste and destruction. His work became a shining example to me of the kind of conceptual backbone that could be attached to esthetic beauty. In my mind his work was able to straddle that imaginary gulf between the *natural* and the *synthetic*. Additionally, when I look back now, I can even see how much his work, and that of Adam's embodied the kind of Western Masculine. The way in which Adams meticulously captured a specific kind of colossal and overwhelming sublime in works such as *The Tetons and the Snake River* serves as a perfect example of where the masculine shows up in his work. The mountain he captures isn't simply "pretty", it's "terrifyingly beautiful!" His works do not just capture a viewer; they blow him away with the power and impact of the stunning vistas. Burtinsky's images function on much the same esthetic plane, but with the added element of a shrewdly crafted message running just under the surface. His images contain the same weight of the visually sublime. Yet they also deal with subject matter that chronicles the byproducts of major manufacturing. Large, powerful, manly endeavors, that pull stone from the earth and result in mountains of tires. It is no wonder why his work acted as such a profound catalyst, not only for the increasing need for strong concept in my early work, but for my own investigation into the role of masculine traditions in my own life.

My own early attempt to reconcile the nature vs. synthetic binary can be seen in works such as my *Texture* series and further into the creation of my *Collageascopes* series. The *Texture* series began as a kind of photographic collection of moments out in the world which offered a particularity tactile visual experience. This collection had been growing for years and it stemmed in part from an old compulsion I had as a child to go out into the world and lay claim to small bits of it. Rocks, pine cones, gun-shaped sticks were brought home and added to an ever-growing collection. Similarly macro photographs of tree bark, leaves and algae were set next to equally close up images of things such as rope or rusting metal. The idea was to blur the lines between which would be found in nature and which would be manufactured; by bringing the viewer in so close that only textures and colors remained as useable information for the brain to categorize. In the *Collageascopes* series I tried to take this one step further by digitally folding the images in on themselves, making the photographs even more abstract and difficult to recognize. These endeavors were not only perfect examples of my fruitless attempts to "solve" a binary that didn't need reconciliation but also a common trend in the way I looked at the actual creation of artwork.

For years there existed in my mind a need to make work which "solved" a problem or, in more masculine terms, create work that would...win. It is a strange notion, but made good sense when considering the central question of where I fit in the great box of "Manhood". Winning, it seems to me, is a very masculine impulse, bringing to mind every sport metaphor I can think of. To bring this to something as naturally fluid as artwork is a fascinating tendency, especially for someone who really could care less about sports and the need for "winning" in any other arena of

life. However my attraction to artists such as Burtinsky or Joseph Kosuth and his work *3 and one Chairs* is pretty good evidence of my own masculine philosophies and need to “win” in art making. These artist and their works seem to prove a point, and I have always been attracted to that act as a means of being right or having power. This was a good thing for me to be aware of but was by no means a fixed truth. My transition from works such as the *Texture* or *Collageascopes* series, which sought to impose some kind of solution or meaning to the naturalist binary, to works such as the *Geo Flower* series, which gave me the ability to simply acknowledge and celebrate the binary, serve as evidence of this.

The *Geo Flowers* (Fig.10) were born from a kind of pseudo-mathematical meditation, as I would allow my eye and hand to simply create geometric patterns on floral photographs I had in my archive. For me this exercise became a way of relearning the beauty of images I had already captured as well as finding harmony within the binary. A kind of beauty in the tension, which transcended the need to “solve” or “win” any kind of point or force some kind of greater understanding. Indeed it is possible to see here that the binary of natural and synthetic things tends to mirror the tension at the heart of my most current work; the briary of the masculine and the feminine. The flower I am naturally drawn to capturing when I hold a camera is distinctly feminine. The strong geometric marks I make on them with bold permanent marker are synthetic and highly masculine. It was pivotally important for me to see that nothing imploded when these two worlds were put together without the intent to resolve them within the same work. In many ways this work is what gave way to pieces such as *The Rose* (fig.09) and allowed the universe of this binary to expand enough to be a question that I could measure myself against. Within my thesis show, *The Rose*, in all of it’s photographic glory, stands alone against the wall.



Fig. 9 *Rose*



Fig. 10 *Geo Flowers*

A stunningly simplistic beauty and subject matter form the feminine, while it's size and proximal relationship to works such as *Space Guns* (fig.10) create a context for it to simultaneously act a masculine entity. This is a perfect example of how allowing the binary to exist without the need to resolve or move toward a singularity was able to become a productive engine for self-examination in my thesis work. When I am not concerned with "winning" at art, I somehow end up making work that delivers a much deeper and more meaningful experience. Within the context of my thesis work this union between flowers and guns remains one of the most effective ways I have to show where I intersect with traditions that align and run contrary to the box of traditional manhood. Works such as *Space Guns* are a way in which I can open the topic of masculinity as it exists to pre adolescent boys as well as create thematically polarized points within the larger world of the show itself that keep the tension moving and alive. The *Space Guns* themselves are a throwback to age 9 when I would raid my father's garage looking for unused materials with which to make weapons. PVC pipes and duck tape would magically be transformed into lethal space blasters that would help occupy long summer hours. It was not a stretch for my 9-year-old mind to turn simple plumbing supplies into guns. However now, as an adult I am given the opportunity to create a set of idealized versions of these fictitious weapons. This is the reason why *Space Guns* is displayed on a photographic light table. The glowing light illuminating the small arsenal from underneath harkens back to both Sci-Fi weapons caches and a gallery collections through out the ages. Throughout my childhood and into adulthood I have been attracted to firearms. This strikes me now as a typical masculine trait that sets me firmly within the box of traditional Manhood. Yet within the world of the thesis show I am able to let these masculine *Space Guns* bounce off of distinctly un-masculine things such as *Geo Flowers* and across the room to the image entitled *Flowerhead*. This image is a large naked portrait of my upper torso with the head replaced by a very vivid, very vaginal orchid. The placement of the flower over my head at once denies my viewers

access to my identity and replaces it with only the semiotic understanding of “flower”. My nakedness within the image reveals my manhood (I do not have breasts) but the flower over my face lays claim not only over my gender, but also over my complete identity. Within image I am reduced to being only a “body” and no longer a “person”, yet because the photograph must also necessarily react with the other pieces in the show, I hold on to my personhood even as it is denied. One could almost make a tally of things within the show that are “team flower” or “team gun” moving from work to work.



Fig. 11 *Space Guns*

However this tallying would likely come to abrupt end when the viewer came to consider the largest and most imposing image in the show. This piece, entitled *Snapdragon* (fig.12), is a 9-foot by 6-foot banner created from an old snapshot of me as a small child, perhaps age 5 or 6. In this photograph I am in a lush lawn next to garden of snapdragons reaching for one flower in particular. However what is even more profound it the fact that, in the act of reaching for this flower, I have cast aside a toy gun with which I was presumably playing only a moment before. This image is perhaps the most important in the whole body of work. It acts as single sentence within the constantly bouncing themes moving through the show itself. The image seems to say “here is a boy who loves guns, but flowers too. Look as he drops one for the other” It is a critical piece of understanding in trying to answer the most central question. It might not give a complete account of the kind of man I am, but it certainly points to the kind of boy I was in relation to a tradition of manhood which has not changed .



Fig. 12 *Snapdragon*

The final work in my thesis cannon is not one that showed up in the gallery space at all. It was a performance that took place after the thesis “event” was over and was witnessed by my viewers only through social media posting and the photographs captured to document the performance. However, like nothing else in my thesis this performance, in which I attempted to hike the Appalachian Trail, opened my eyes to the true nature of my central question and what it really means to be a man. Of the 2,0189 miles comprising the Appalachian Trail, which I set out to conquer in May of 2016, I completed only around 400. I remember seeing a large topographical map of the trail at the midway point where I begin my adventure and thinking... “no. fucking. way.” This journey ended in a kind of simulations failure and triumph which brought forth a final missing piece to my central question. I failed to complete much more than a 16th of what I set out to do. But somehow in that seeming failure I found humility and it has answered the question that has been so central to my art practice these last two years:

What makes a man?

So much of the examinations I have done into my own work have been about what makes a man from the perspective of the outside looking in. From the worlds view cast onto the man and the man, as absorbent clay, taking on that shape while struggling to find the authentic pose of his own soul. The question that haunted me and directed the substance of my thesis exhibition had to do with my own tenuous and confused grasp of how I fit into a tradition of social masculinity. Even trying to work against these stereotypes I paid homage to them in the amount of concern I lay at their feet. However it is only after having trudged through hot dense woods at 2 am with a 21-year-old female pre-med student who had already walked more than 1000miles of the trail that I realized how little water these notions of masculinity I had been so closely studying truly hold. I think these lessons learned as a result of trying and failing at such a trek while so many others succeeded, is exactly the kind of experience I needed to have in order to make proper sense of so much of my

work. The realization I have come to is that the question matters so much less than it once did and, in so minimizing, the answer seems to be the recognition that there is no conflict with which I must contend. In much the same way that my need to “solve” the nature vs. synthetic binary faded with investigation, so to has the import of the central issue in my thesis. The measure of a man is not in his relationship to the social definitions of masculinity, but in his relationship to himself. It is in the quality and meaning he can create in the world around him regardless of gender binaries. Put in a more Zen Philosophical way:

The student asks: “teacher, what makes a Man?”

And the teacher responds: “What kind of man do you want to be?”

IMAGE LIST

- Fig. 01 Justin T Walsh, *Man Cave*, Multimedia Installation, 2016
- Fig. 02 Justin T Walsh, *Snakes & Snails*, 2:00min, Video, 2014
- Fig. 03 Justin T Walsh, *Human Endeavor No.1 (HUNT)*, 8:33min, Video, 2015
- Fig. 04 Justin T Walsh, *Human Endeavor No.2 (SKIN)*, 11:48min, Video, 2015
- Fig. 05 Justin T Walsh, *Human Endeavor No.3 (CHOP)*, 1:15min, Video, 2015
- Fig. 06 Justin T Walsh, *Human Endeavor No.4 (HARM)*, 3:51min, Video, 2016
- Fig. 07 Justin T Walsh, *Self-Harm*, 2016, Inkjet Print & Fishing line, 2016
- Fig. 08 Justin T Walsh, *Human Endeavor No.5 (CRY)*, 5:01min, Video, 2016
- Fig. 09 Justin T Walsh, *Rose*, U.V. Print on Euro Panel, 2015
- Fig. 11 Justin T Walsh, *Geo Flowers*, Inkjet Print & Marker, 2015
- Fig. 12 Justin T Walsh, *Space Guns*, PVC Pipe, 2016
- Fig. 13 Justin T Walsh, *Snapdragon*, Vinyl Banner, 2016